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LINGUISTICS AS A REQUIRED SUBJECT IN COLLEGE AND IN HIGH SCHOOL

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The purpose in making linguistics a college requirement for students and prospective teachers of English and an essential part of the high-school curriculum is not to turn every student into a Samuel Johnson; nor is it to develop him to fulfil Richard Grant White's conception of a real philologist, who, he says, "horsed upon Grimm's law, chases the evasive syllable over umlauts and ablauts into the faintly echoing recesses of the Himalayas." Study of linguistics may create a desire for deep, scholarly research, but this need not be its main purpose nor its main value.

Before we consider the value of this subject as a college and a high-school requirement it should be understood that the term "linguistics" as used here includes a study of the history of word meanings—their specialization, transference, and degeneration; that it also involves a study of the structural development of words; and that this necessitates a knowledge of certain affixes and roots, and of inflection and derivation. The other phases of linguistics, as that term is used here, are word usage (including meaning and pronunciation) and the history of the English language as a whole.

Except among selected groups of scholars such a study has in the past received scant attention. Even today it is evident from observation of our schools and from inquiries made of teachers that there are comparatively few who realize, or care to realize, the full importance of the subject. There is little appreciation of how valuable it might be, not only to the teacher, but also to the student of English. Hence linguistics has been pushed into a corner of the graduate school of our universities, where, even for language specialists, it remains an elective subject. It is true that many high-school teachers give some instruction in word histories, the principles of English usage, and the development of the language as

a whole; but their efforts are for the most part spasmodic. Furthermore, much of the instruction that they give shows a limited and often a decidedly inaccurate knowledge of the subject. On one occasion a high-school teacher in discussing the phrase "ominous silence" complacently explained to her class that the word *ominous* comes from the Latin *omnis*, meaning "all," and that an ominous silence therefore means a silence that is *all* over everything—in other words, a pervasive silence! This is only one of many linguistic absurdities and inaccuracies that flourish in some of our English classrooms.

It will perhaps be argued that we should not expect teachers to know linguistics more thoroughly, that they cannot know everything, and that we must somewhere place a limit. But linguistics would not for a moment lie outside this limit if its practical value toward a complete mastery of English were fully realized.

Consider the value, to teacher and student, of an acquaintance with the history of word meanings, one phase of linguistics as outlined here. Any teacher who in discussing a vocabulary or a list of spelling words cannot call attention to a few of these interesting histories misses his chief opportunity for making that phase of his work alive and significant. Such a teacher would pass by any mention of the interesting changes recorded in the words "pocket handkerchief," the stories connected with "sandwich," "hector," and "tantalize," and the poetry embodied in "daisy." In these and in scores of other words there are countless opportunities for making the study of spelling a living thing, not a mechanical, dry-as-dust burden. It would, of course, be worse than useless for a high-school teacher to treat this phase of linguistics too extensively or in too great detail. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that its value lies not so much in the amount of information it furnishes as in the mental attitude that it creates in the pupil. It gives him a respect for words, a realization that they are not mere arbitrary letter groups, but that they are bundles of history, of legend, or of poetry. When this attitude of respect and interest has once been created toward spelling and vocabulary the increased effort of the pupils to investigate and master words is little short of surprising.

Another phase of linguistics which is also of considerable value is the study of word structure. This, of course, requires some knowledge of roots, affixes, inflection, and derivation. Not many years ago the part of this study which relates to affixes and roots was adopted in the schools in the hope that it would give pupils an accurate understanding of word meanings, of spelling, and of pronunciation. It was declared a failure, however. Opponents of the method stated that actual memorizing of a word was better than reaching a conclusion as to its meaning or its spelling through a maze of affixes and roots. Nevertheless, even these enemies of the method admit that if wisely used it is a great help in checking wrong contextual suggestions and in showing the correct division of unfamiliar words; that while it cannot take the place of example and of drill, it is a most valuable supplement to them.

An acquaintance with the principles of English usage—a third element in linguistic study—is worth while, not only because it helps toward a wise choice of words, but also because it does away with bigoted ideas as to what is right and wrong in English; it prevents slavish obedience to the hairsplitting and often groundless distinctions as to usage and pronunciation that are advocated by extreme purists—distinctions that have crept into many of our dictionaries and textbooks, where they are receiving undue attention and respect from many students and teachers. In connection with word usage, synonyms and antonyms should be studied in order to strengthen and develop an accurate sense of word meanings. With high-school students this must not be carried too far; it must be limited to words which the pupils will actually use. As a help toward a complete understanding of all these phases of linguistics, a study of the history of the English language as a whole is essential. Students should know the chief stages through which the language has passed, the main sources from which it is derived, and the factors which have influenced its growth. This knowledge will serve as a foundation for the other phases of linguistics, and as a supplement to them.

It will be justly asked whether linguistic instruction, more thorough and systematic than that which the average high-school teacher gives, has ever been tried and proven successful. This

question is based largely upon the assumption that the high-school student is not sufficiently mature to profit by such instruction. An answer to this question is given by Professor Rollo Walter Brown, of Wabash College, in his *How the French Boy Learns to Write*.¹ In this he shows, among other things, how the study of linguistics is carried out in the schools of France. There it is not left until the boy reaches the equivalent of our college or graduate school; it begins when he is fourteen or fifteen years old. As to the nature and value of this study Professor Brown writes:

By the time the boy leaves the lycée, he has learned something of the life of words, of roots, of affixes . . . of simple words, of compound words; he has become acquainted with the linguistic significance of the Roman invasion, and he has had an opportunity to see how doublets have come into the language; he has discovered some of the distinguishing marks of popular and learned origins . . . he has been asked to note scores of changes—perhaps each slight in itself—that have taken place within the past two centuries. The value of the study can scarcely be doubted. . . . It gives the pupil a language background. He has some knowledge of the past; and if the study has served only to acquaint him with the fact that there has been a past in language, his time has been well spent. [Furthermore] it gives him a just notion of the nature of language. After some instruction of this kind, he cannot look upon language as a thing that is fixed and unchangeable. . . . Many matters that, perchance, have perplexed him from his earliest youth are now made clear. . . . The study arouses a healthy curiosity about language problems. . . . Pupils come to see that the history of a language may be almost as interesting as the history of the people with whose life it is interwoven.

Those who admit the value of this study may object to it on the ground that there is no time for it in our crowded high-school curriculum; but this objection is hardly justifiable. The maximum amount of time needed for the study of the history of the English language would be fifteen or twenty recitation periods with supplementary reading and review. The study of the history, structure, and usage of words should, for the most part, be incidental to work in spelling, composition, grammar, and literature. Another important question as to the practicability of such a course in high school concerns the teacher himself. He must not take away the interest and effectiveness of linguistics by making it too detailed and technical, for its chief value is, as Professor Brown expresses it,

¹ Harvard University Press. See pp. 111-13, inclusive.

to arouse "a healthy curiosity" about language problems, not to burden the student with masses of facts merely for the sake of informing him. If interest and "healthy curiosity" can be maintained, the amount of information that the student gets will take care of itself. As in the teaching of other subjects, it is imperative that the material of linguistics should be simplified and made relevant and significant. As a first step toward success in presenting it effectively, it is essential, of course, that the teacher should be equipped with a broad and thorough knowledge of the subject. To give him this necessary preparation is the business of the college. But unless the college makes linguistics a required rather than an elective subject there will continue to be teachers who know little or nothing about it, for there are few who elect it in the graduate school and still fewer who study it by themselves.

To make a complete and exact plan of procedure for a high-school course in linguistics is impossible, because the material must be adapted to the particular school or class. The brief general outline given below, however, would be practicable for the ordinary high-school course and covers the essential points. It is intended only as a suggestion for a method of treatment. Other material can be added, provided it is not too technical and is made relevant to the work in spelling, composition, and literature. Information relating to all the topics included in this plan may be found in the following list of books; a careful reading of these is essential for any teacher who has not studied linguistics. All of them contain chapters and sections which may be assigned to the pupils for reference; but much of the material will have to be adapted by the teacher, particularly in the case of first- and second-year pupils. As yet there is no single text which embodies all phases of the subject in sufficiently simple form for the ordinary high-school student.

PLAN FOR LINGUISTICS IN HIGH SCHOOL

FIRST TWO YEARS

I. *History of the English language*.—A simple, elementary study of the history of the English language is given in the Appendix to Krapp's *Elements of English Grammar*. This is a good foundation for work with Freshmen and Sophomores. The material in this brief Appendix should be supplemented

by concrete examples from other sources and by additional material showing how history, customs, and folklore are embodied in English words. This phase of linguistics should be given early in the first year.

II. *Etymologies*.—In connection with literature and composition, and particularly in connection with spelling, call attention to the simpler and more interesting etymologies and changes in word meanings. A few of the words by which these points are best illustrated are "pantry," "dungeon," "belfry," "handkerchief," "tantalize," "tawdry," "hector." Explanations of these and of many others may be found in Greenough and Kittredge's *Words and Their Ways*, particularly in chapters xvii–xxi, and in chapters xxv and xxvi; also in Bradley's *The Making of English*, chapter v.

III. *Spelling and word usage, word structure*.—In connection with spelling teach

- A. Use of the dictionary, (1) the meaning of the more common terms and abbreviations used, and (2) the degree to which the dictionary may be depended upon as an absolute authority. This dictionary study would connect itself with questions as to usage, including meaning and pronunciation. There is excellent material for this in Krapp's *Modern English*.
- B. Synonyms and antonyms should be studied in connection with the assigned spelling words.
- C. As a help in spelling and in word division teach some of the more common prefixes and suffixes. These should not be presented in the form of a list to be memorized; they should be gradually assimilated in connection with a discussion of the words in spelling or composition in which they actually occur.
- D. In a simple way show how words are built up. Material for this may be found in *Words and Their Ways*, chapters xiii and xiv, and in *The Making of English*, chapter iv.

IV. *Historical grammar*.—There are a few points of historical grammar which may be given to make clear some of the difficulties and apparent inconsistencies met and to add interest to seemingly arbitrary and meaningless principles.

- A. In connection with nouns and their inflectional forms give
 1. Explanation of irregular plurals: their origin.
 2. Explanation of peculiarities in nouns of relationship.
 3. Explanation of how distinctive gender forms developed, and how suffixes expressing gender have changed since the Old English period.
 4. Explanation of the history and use of the apostrophe.
- B. In connection with adjectives explain irregular comparison.
- C. In connection with adverbs and other particles
 1. Explain why "hard," "fast," etc., have the same form as adjectives.
 2. Explain the origin of "no," "not," and "yes."
 3. Explain origin of the endings "-ly," "-long," "-e(s)," and "-ce."
 4. Call attention to the past and present use of double negatives. (See Emerson's *Brief History of the English Language* for all the foregoing points.)

LAST TWO YEARS

During the last two years a similar plan may be followed. There is such an endless variety of words to discuss that mere repetition need not be feared. The chief line of advance in these later years would be in the history of the English language. Students of Latin, French, or German could go into this a little more extensively than those with knowledge of English only. With the exception of phonetic change and the minor details of Grimm's law, Juniors and Seniors should be able to take up the main facts in Emerson's *Brief History of the English Language* in a connected and systematic way.

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